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ABSTRACT

Many strategy options are open to state education agencies interested in developing statewide programs to support and guide local school improvement efforts. Agencies can focus on instructional improvement, more general school improvement, improvement of the curricular program, or changes in educational structures. Factors influencing which of these foci to select include the political, fiscal, developmental, and aspirational contexts in which the state agency is operating. Once a strategy is selected, the agency must still determine what aspects of the strategy to stress, how to limit the range of efforts for greatest impact, how to maximize cooperation, how to ensure public support, how to develop adequate background data for assessing needs and measuring change, and what kinds of results to seek and to expect. (PGD)

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STATEWIDE SUPPORT OF LOCAL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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Discussion Draft

Prepared for the
Chief State School Officers of the Northwest and Pacific

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The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory acknowledges with thanks the cooperation of ECS in making available the draft report of this research study, the cross-site analyses of the ten state programs, and staff time to discuss the policy issues which the study raised, and which are the subject of this paper.

STATEWIDE SUPPORT OF LOCAL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

I. Introduction

The enthusiastic pursuit of excellence in American education, a movement which has gained national prominence particularly within the last half-dozen years, has had a wide variety of proponents. Authors of the various "quality," "excellence," and "reform" reports--and persons influenced by these reports--gave great initial impetus to the movement. Citizens (and particularly parents) have spoken up for needed change; professional associations have added their voices in support of qualitative improvement; and legislatures and governors have been among the strongest proponents of reform.

Backed (and pushed) by these powerful forces, the education establishment itself has undertaken the task of directly bringing about the desired changes. Although in each state the specific improvements have to take place locally--at the classroom, the school, and the district level—the overall responsibility for support and direction continues to rest with the state education agency.

A wealth of data is being gathered about how states have actually gone about devising and operating their individual statewide improvement programs. These data have promise of helping any given state, through comparison with the successes and problems of other states, make more precise analyses of its own programs, better predictions of what is likely to succeed or to fail, and clearer determination of just how the SEA may best support local efforts and provide continuing momentum to effective reforms.

Now that there are available comparative data about statewide school improvement programs, a useful next step may be to raise some policy

issues that ought to be examined and to delineate some policy options that may merit consideration as SEAs think through their evolving roles in supportng local school improvement efforts. To provide background for Chief State School Officers and their staffs in making these policy analyses is the purpose of this paper.

II. Multiple Paths to Local School Improvement

Examination of programs for improving schools in representative states, both in the Northwest/Pacific region and throughout the nation, indicates quite clearly that a variety of policy options have been exercised in choosing a general path toward implementing the desired changes. These paths (or perhaps more properly "strategies") have generally been identified and described under four headings: instructional improvement; school improvement; curriculum/program improvement; and structural responses.

Instructional improvement approaches focus on the actual teaching/learning process, and generally rely heavily on the adoption of specific instructional models and emphasize highly structured staff development activities.

School improvement strategies derive largely from the "effective schools" research. In keeping with the findings of this research, these strategies go beyond just instructional improvement into specific activities addressed to improving the whole-school program: expectations, aspirations, requirements, and environments; the leadership functions of the principal; the more focused use of learning time; and the other features generally found in the effective schools program.

Curriculum/program improvement strategies address particularly the strenthening of curricular content, the raising of promotion and

graduation standards, and the detailed testing of students to assure that required competencies have actually been achieved.

"Structural responses" is a perhaps overbroad term sometimes used to describe the school improvement strategies clustered around changes in the structure of education, such as revisions of state finance systems, teacher preparation and remuneration systems, delivery-of-services systems, and local school structural organization.

These one-sentence characterizations of the paths or strategies obviously do not do justice to any of the options, but they may be sufficient for our purpose here: to give basis for the suggestion that the choice or modification of any one of these strategies is itself a major education policy question. This would seem obvious were it not for the fact that examination of individual state programs does not reveal very clearly why the choice was made to adopt one of these primary strategies and not another. What do appear to be the bases for the choice of a specific school improvement strategy?

III. Bases for Choice

Strategies calculated to undergird statewide support of local school improvement seem almost inevitably to reflect particular state contexts, rather than strictly educational policy choices. Although the choice of strategy is directed toward educational ends, it is not necessarily made for educational reasons.

The political context often influences, or even dictates, the choice of improvement strategy. A legislative or gubernatorial interest and initiative becomes both the motivating force and the enabling strategy for the change process. It often seems to make good sense to capitalize upon the momentum of a thrust that has come out of the political

process. If there is strong political support, say, for improving the status and performance of teaching, or for establishing clearer and more demanding curricular requirements, either of these would make an effective central theme for a statewide improvement effort.

The fiscal context may effectively determine the choice of a central improvement strategy. Maybe this should not be so; but practically, since there are numerous strategies which could reasonably be used to bring about local school improvement, the one or ones which have the greatest likelihood of garnering fiscal support attain a priority status.

The stage-of-development context often determines the choice of next steps. Major efforts to strengthen statewide assessment and evaluation techniques, for example, might appropriately be delayed while attention is focused first on pressing instructional and curricular problems.

The aspirations context. Just as the present status often has a determining effect on improvement strategies chosen, so does the state decision makers' collective view of what is desired down the road, what direction the state wants its education system to go, what hopes it has for the future. This may sound idealistic and hence not really "practical," but it is fairly clear that directional choices determine what is actually done to and with the educational system--and what is left undone. If high academic standards and rigorous requirements are the paramount aspiration, equity concerns may be slighted; but the exact opposite is also true. Likewise, strategies for the improvement of teaching will differ depending on whether the emphasis is on "getting rid of the bad apples," as the popular saying goes, or on markedly upgrading the quality of all teachers.

As these contexts are taken into consideration by state-level decision makers, the decisions to be made are not automatically

determined--they simply become better informed and potentially sounder. Choices of strategies for school improvement become real decisions, not the product of miscellaneous chance factors. But within these broad, strategic policy choices are to be found a number of specific policy issues briefly examined below.

IV. Specific Policy Issues

It might appear that once a state has embarked on a plan to improve schools, the relevant policy questions have been pretty well settled, and the policy options effectively foreclosed. This is what we are going to do, the directions we are going to take; now let's get on with the programmatic and operational details." Yet policy issues keep coming up.

Focus. "Instructional improvement," let us say, may be a chosen strategy for statewide implementation, but within the cluster of emphases and activities embraced by that general term are many policy options to be examined. The focus could be on improvement of the recruitment of top students into teacher education programs, or improvement of the programs themselves; on competency testing, both preservice and inservice; on increasing teacher salaries, improving working conditions, and offering career incentives; on the introduction and institutionalizing of a specific, research-based teaching methodology; on the increased and more effective use of instructional technology; or on one or another of the many facets of the entire strategy. The specific focus adopted becomes a clear expression of statewide educational policy.

Limits. In considering the various ways a program for school improvement might be focused, one might be tempted to conclude that there could be some little bit of everything tried in order to see what works best. Such an approach, sometimes justified by calling it "pragmatic" or

"eclectic," seems to be in contradiction to the currently reported research findings which indicate quite clearly that educational change is generally most effective if it is limited to a very small number of specific objectives. Very practically, state and local educational authorities are faced with obvious limits in funding, staff, and possibilities for sustained interest. It would seem to be a sound educational policy choice, therefore, to decide in advance the specific dimensions of the improvement program undertaken.

Options which cover the entire possible range of activities can be valued--and hence chosen--for their "comprehensiveness" only at the risk of ultimate program dilution.

Mandates. States which have embarked on school improvement programs of whatever sort have almost universally reported that one of the toughest educational policy decisions to be made is determining the relative place of mandates and volunteerism in the programs. The concept of a local district, or even an individual school within a district, becoming involved in an improvement program entirely on its own volition is very appealing. It has long been recognized that people do best that which they want to do. It is generally maintained that educational change is most effective--"takes" more quickly and lasts longer--when there is a sense of ownership: involvement in the process which comes out of a sense of a need being met, of being a voluntary participant in something important to the individual and the group. Volunteering, making free choices, taking part because you want to--all of these are prized conditions underlying successful educational change.

Is the clearly preferable educational policy in statewide support of educational improvement, then, to maximize volunteer participation and to minimize mandates? Not necessarily; there are sound reasons for having

even somewhat unpalatable requirements set by the state for local districts, for individual schools, for teachers, and for students. Mandates are politically acceptable: the public wants to see changes required. Mandates are legislatively favored--the legislature is often more willing to support fiscally those programs and standards which they have mandated. The strong motivating factor of a public-accountability mandate has been noted in many of the states which have adopted statewide programs for school improvement.

Mandates have a further and more important virtue: they help underscore the importance of combining high aspirations with high expectations, and undergirding both with demanding requirements. The "effective schools" research, for example, indicates quite clearly that one of the keys to school improvement is the formulation of a cluster of educational policies at the local and state levels which articulate clearly an acceptance of the principle that all students not only can learn, but that they are expected to and--within the limits of their native abilities--will be required to. And so for teachers: all teachers are expected to teach effectively (however it may be decided to measure effectiveness); special training may be demanded; specific testing and evaluation may likewise be required; and professional penalties, including dismissal, may be imposed for failure to come up to these expectations.

To note the ever-present tension between a voluntary approach to educational improvement and one mandated to various degrees is not to gloss over the complexity of the problem, much less to suggest a clear-cut policy position. Simply, it is an issue which will probably have to be not only addressed but decided essentially by state-level educational policy makers.

Public support. Any program of school improvement, whatever strategy or path is chosen in an attempt to bring about this improvement, is burdened with inherent problems of gaining popular support. Change is often distasteful, sometimes painful. Perceptions of what the schools are now doing and how they are succeeding or failing at their task are widely divergent among various sectors of the public. Funds are short--and so, often, are tempers: people get mad when they start discussing educational issues!

State-level educational decision-making bodies, therefore, have quite generally discovered that any attempted change in the way schools operate requires the establishment of policies calculated to assure public support without abdicating their own responsibility for making tough decisions. It is for this reason that many policy-making boards, both at state and local levels, try to work within a policy setting which gives specific and detailed attention to securing as broad-based consensus as possible. Gubernatorial and legislative support is ideally sought very early in the game, without necessarily waiting for a political solution to be imposed on the educational problem. "Interested parties" support needs to be sought from diverse groups: local school boards and local school administrators; teacher and administrator organizations; special concern groups (for example, those interested in vocational education, education of the handicapped, etc.); and, of increasing importance, business-industry-labor groups which cooperate with educators in matters of mutual concern.

It might seem that these various support groups would just naturally be consulted, their advice and ideas sought, before many major statewide educational improvement programs would be undertaken. But the history of educational change efforts does not necessarily bear out this assumption;

only when clearly articulated, early-on policies require the inclusion of the entire range of public interests in planning the proposed change has this support been actually engendered. Legislative distrust, public suspicion, teacher-administrator conflict--these never completely disappear, but they are minimized to the degree that bedrock policy calls for the involvement of all of the concerned groups.

Reliable data. To suggest that something so apparently objective as "data" may embrace policy issues might seem far-fetched--after all, facts are facts. However, examination of the programs of a number of states which have found their statewide programs meeting with only a marginal degree of success suggests that the basic policies with respect to educational data acquisition and use may be of extreme importance. It would seem, for example, that it might be a bit reckless to start any far-reaching program looking toward educational improvement (regardless of the particular path chosen or the strategy developed) without having information bases which accurately describe the present situation. Yet it is hard to escape the conclusion that some statewide programs have been initiated, often as a result of strong political pressure, without very clear knowledge of the starting point from which the change effort is taking off.

Moreover, the specific strategies chosen--absent believable and reliable research basis to support the choice--may reflect more the enthusiasm of some zealous group, the charisma of a renowned consultant, the persuasiveness of a convinced and convincing commercial entrepreneur, or some other external motivating force rather than any real and substantial data.

Again, the policy choice to be made cannot be specified or even recommended; but the necessity for information and data based on relevant

research can be unequivocally advocated as essential to the policy-making process.

State impetus and local interests. Each of the strategies for lending statewide support to local improvement of education raises touchy policy issues involving the interaction between state and local educational authorities. If couched in the familiar terms of the "local control" problem, the issue gets hopelessly bogged down in mutual recriminations, the LEAs often complaining that the state is insensitive and heavy-handed, the SEAs contending that the local districts are inveterate foot-draggers, steadfastly resisting any state-initiated change.

Some state/local conflict is probably inevitable, but the experience of several states with successful school-renewal programs suggests that initial attention to some policy issues can result in the very productive employment of the complementary strengths of state and local agencies.

If the SEA sees itself--and effectively sells itself--not as a collection of independent bureaucratic fiefdoms, monitoring and enforcing state mandates, but as an integrated leadership and service agency, conflicts with the LEAs are minimized. As the SEA becomes a proponent of improvements, a provider of appropriate technical assistance, and a supplier of even modest supplementary funds, its chances of finding acceptance at the local level seem greatly enhanced. The LEA, under such circumstances, becomes quite literally a partner in the change enterprise.

For example, if the SEA assumes responsibility as the initial trainer-of-trainers for a specific state-sponsored scheme of instructional improvement, and is able to provide at least some funding for released time for teachers, then the local district can see itself the prime mover in the enterprise, using its own trained and competent

staff to effect the spread of the program at the local level. If in an overall school improvement process, attention focused on improving the instructional leadership of the principal can be concentrated in some sort of academy for principals, jointly staffed by state, association, and local district personnel, chances for successful implementation of the program are greatly increased.

Conscious establishment at the state level of a policy of complementary local/state contributions to the improvement program, with strong emphasis on cooperative training, effective state technical assistance available upon local request, and at least some state financial support--these features of the program would seem likely to relieve a great deal of the local/state tension.

Long-range effects of limited measures. Perhaps more as a matter of perspective than of policy, strictly speaking, educational policy makers might want to give serious consideration to the problem of the tenuous, fragile, unpredictable nature of educational change. For example, an oft-stated current problem facing those who are charged with supporting statewide efforts at local school improvement is this: how do you keep up the momentum, once the public concern, the legislative push, and the fiscal support begin to wane, and indifference replaces enthusiasm?

One basis on which policy might be formulated--though not really a policy itself--is to operate from a premise that all reasonable measures that can be taken are at best limited: no one action, no one program, no one strategy is going to result in massive reform. Change will be incremental, piecemeal.

Not only will the results be limited; they will be (if the experience of many states who have been involved in formal improvement of education activities can be relied on) extremely long-range in effect. Instruction

is not likely to become suddenly more effective; student achievement scores are unlikely to shoot up all at once; community participation and support in setting and achieving educational goals will emerge slowly. Policies that work are usually rooted in patience.

The emergence of unintended results can also be anticipated, and policies will doubtless need to be flexible enough to permit midcourse corrections. If "direct teaching," for example, becomes too formalized and stilted, modifications of the procedures may need to be considered. If academic emphasis is found to be cutting too deeply into desirable breadth of other programs--vocational education and extracurricular activities, for example--steps to restore balance may need to be taken. If a too narrowly formulated definition of quality becomes a threat to desired equity, broader concepts and more flexible programs may need to be devised. Keeping up the momentum for educational improvement may be largely a function of willingness to adapt policy to reality.

In Summary

Sound research conducted, actual experience recorded and analyzed, and innovative ideas put into practice--these appear to be what bases we now have available for undergirding the statewide support of local school improvement. Selection of a comprehensive strategy at the state level for incorporation into the activities at the local level has been accomplished in many states. This necessary first step does not, of course, solve the policy issues--it simply raises and clarifies them for consideration as next steps are taken.